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Beyond Prejudice: Extending the Social Psychology of Conflict, Inequality and Social Change

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Beyond Prejudice. Extending the Social Psychology of Conflict, Inequality and Social Change, edited by John Dixon and Mark Levine. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012. 333pp. ISBN: 9870521139625.

Anna Miglietta
University of Torino - Italy
e-mail: anna.miglietta@unito.it
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Since its foundation, the psychosocial perspective on prejudice has been mainly concerned to what we can find *behind* prejudice, i.e. the determinants of prejudicial attitudes in intergroup relations. Dixon and Levine invite us to go *beyond* prejudice looking through different lenses at “how social psychologists have framed the entire problem of investigating, understanding and changing intergroup relations” (p. 2). This claim suggests that the real core of this book is to propose a critical look on the implications that the mainstream framing of the prejudice problematic has on the models of social change.

The proposed standpoint emphasizes the causal relationship between the conceptualization of a topic and its investigation. This only apparently obvious observation, forces the reader to reflect on the circularity of the relationship between theory and research practice, between political ideologies and the reality of intergroup relations. We can interpret the popular adage “seek and ye shall find” in the sense that those who seek only find what they are looking for, calling into question how the concept is assessed. Indeed, the methodology of data collection determines the very nature of the collected data that in turn, will be read and understood in the light of the same theoretical assumptions guiding the research. For a social scientist, it is important to be aware of the implications of this roundabout, since the study of social phenomena often cannot relieve from taking into account the dynamics of power acting in human societies. Since power dynamics are strictly connected to the political sphere, and since social scientists too are involved in such dynamics, this implies that political values are parts of social theories, and social scientists’ perspectives may find a correspondence in their political visions.

Despite the plurality of voices, *Behind Prejudice* holds a clear and defined character. The main underlying argument is that the psycho-social mainstream approach to conflict and discrimination is based on specific, but somehow implicit assumptions that draw an image of the prejudice person, the bigot, at the same time sophisticated and partial. It is sophisticated because researchers acknowledge to the bigot a considerable complexity in terms of cognitive and emotional biases. It is partial because this image relies on a perspective that finds in the individual its reference point and places the origin of negative beliefs in a lack of rationality of the prejudiced person. Coherently, the proposed solutions for reducing prejudiced attitudes and for reaching a greater social cohesion promote rehabilitative interventions aimed to the correction of individuals' erroneous beliefs.

From this standpoint, *Behind Prejudice* proposes a complete shift, rooting stereotypic beliefs in the dynamics of social identification and in the wider structure of social reality. Following social categorization perspective, stereotypes are here considered flexible representations that hold a correspondence with the objective features of social contexts and are instrumental in the construction of the vantage point of view from which majority group members look at social reality. The shift of the analysis from individual to group-level even allows to explain the ideological role of ambivalent prejudice in maintaining social inequalities. To maintain its privileges, the dominant group should promote a model of social harmony where intergroup inequalities are justified and legitimized, avoiding subordinate members to embrace models of social change that should lead to a potential change in social power distribution. A blend of paternalistic and hostile emotions is instrumental to the reproduction of a system of hierarchical domination, since hostile attitudes cause the paternalistic forms appear more widely acceptable and embraceable by subordinate group members. Paternalistic attitudes, indeed, are defined by positive emotions that contribute to create a cooperative social mood where the dominant group smoothly share with the subordinate one economic and symbolic resources. However, a similar exchange has an asymmetric nature since social roles are shaped inside the dominant group and positive emotions are used to reward only subordinate group members that display the characteristics set by advantaged people. Positive feelings, moreover, create bonds of connections between groups, increasing the identification of subordinates with

the dominants, thus reducing intergroup hostility and leading to a social cohesion based on a consensual relationship of dominance and subordination.

The intergroup perspective shows its limits, however, when deals with social inclusion and proposes models of prejudice reduction based on the development of a common, super-ordinate and inclusive group identity. Indeed, the power differential among social groups enables the dominant one to impose an assimilative model of identity where their own attributes are the standards. It follows that the common identity improves social cohesion but forgets social justice and equity.

In sum, what *Beyond Prejudice* suggests is that the current perspective from which social psychology looks to prejudice analysis and reduction may contribute in the perpetuation and legitimization of social inequalities. In order to be faithful to the commitment of “*changing as well as understanding society*” (p. 304, italics in text), the authors of the volume suggest that psychologists should consider more the role of collective action in achieving social justice. There are few doubts about the “political unfairness” of a collective action perspective, since its guiding assumption is that a greater social justice could be obtained through intergroup conflicts and minorities mass mobilization. As Dixon and Levine affirm “the goal of this model of change is not to reduce but to instigate intergroup conflict in order to challenge institutional inequalities in historically divided societies.” (p. 317).

Now the matter, as the authors point out in their final reflections, is whether and how to reconcile a prejudice reduction model of social change with a model based on collective action, a commitment in social harmony and cohesion with a commitment in conflict and change. Whether the perspective of a social change for a greater social justice is appealing, since it invites us not to rely uncritically on the myths of harmony and cohesion, the ways in which such a change could be achieved are in some ways frightening, since they recall to mind ancient echoes that praised the war as the “world's only hygiene”.

Dixon and Levine close their volume inviting the scholars of the field to reflect on this topic with an open-mind attitude. It is for us to accept their invitation and to elaborate a new understanding of the prejudice problematic with a greater awareness about its social and political implications, definitely stating that science could not be neutral when looks to human beings' affairs.